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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

18 JUNE 1987

US-Western Europe: Reactions to West Berlin Visit

Summary

West European reactions to President Reagan's speech at the Brandenburg Gate have been muted, except in West Germany, where press and official public comment generally divided along predictable lines between left and right. Although reactions have been mixed, there has been significant emphasis on the positive aspects of what some have termed "Reagan's Berlin Initiative," particularly the call for East-West cooperation on Berlin and the Olympics idea. Critical comment--generally by those predisposed to dislike the President--focused on the stage-managed ambiance of the event and on unfavorable comparisons with performances by previous US presidents. [REDACTED]

This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] of the Office of European Analysis. It is based almost entirely on press reports and public statements of officials, largely because embassies [REDACTED] have not yet reported on reactions to the Berlin visit. Questions are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Issues and Applications Division, Office of European Analysis, [REDACTED]

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Positive Reactions

Most West European media covered the speech with straightforward rapportage (often on inside or back pages, especially in Britain, where elections dominated public interest) or--as in numerous West German reports--with generally positive accounts. For example, Le Monde, The Times of London, and the conservative West German weekly Welt Am Sonntag (Hamburg) reported the events without commentary. Their accounts emphasized the uniformly favorable comments of Chancellor Kohl, Berlin Mayor Diepgen, and others who hailed the visit as a reaffirmation of US-German friendship and the speech as an articulate offer of cooperation to the East.

The independent and conservative press--notably Die Welt and the Frankfurter Allgemeine in West Germany--applauded the substance of Reagan's speech as a genuine "Berlin initiative" that aimed to define a basis for joint East-West efforts to find solutions to the German question. In yet another account the Frankfurter Allgemeine applauded the President's announcement of "an active Berlin policy," while even a generally critical leftist daily, the Frankfurter Rundschau, admitted that "all told, despite his criticism of the wall and lack of freedom [in the Eastern Bloc], Reagan's speech was a signal to Gorbachev to work jointly with him for a more peaceful world." One of West Germany's most respected conservative dailies, in an oblique reference to strains in US-West German relations over the current INF negotiations, even touted the visit and speech as a lift "for the whole Western Alliance" which it said was "seriously harmed in recent months."

President Reagan's "tear down this wall" message struck a responsive cord in Western Europe and especially in West Germany, but the idea of a Berlin Olympics appears to have stirred an even more positive reaction among West Germans. Much of the media reported Interior Minister Zimmermann's assessment that the proposal was a "fascinating idea." Zimmermann told Die Welt that Bonn was waiting for positive echos from East Berlin and Moscow, and Willi Daume, president of West Germany's national olympic committee, suggested that Berlin games would be "possible" by the year 2000.

Those who praised the President's visit and speech also lamented the riots in Berlin's Kreuzberg district the night before and the violent protests that followed his departure.

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Even leftist media that often sympathize with even violent protests labelled it a "disaster" for West Germany "that the US President's appearance had to take place behind barriers."

Negative Reactions

Left-of-center West European media have struck a number of familiar anti-Reagan themes, but in a more subdued way than usual. For example, the most prominent leftist West German daily* emphasized the stage-managed quality of the visit--notably the Hollywood set quality of the Brandenburg Gate location for the speech, the "emotionalized" character of other stops during the visit, and the timing of key events to meet the requirements of "extremely popular US breakfast TV shows." Several critical commentaries noted the crowd was hand-picked; one emphasized that, of the 35,000 tickets issued to Americans, German policemen, reliable civil servants, etc., only about 20,000 were used.

Critics attacked the speech itself from several perspectives. Some leftist media echoed the sentiments of Berlin's SPD Chairman Walter Momper, who charged that it was characteristically "contradictory" in that it mixed stern criticism of the Soviet Union and offers of East/West cooperation. One respected British daily described the speech as "partly couched in melodramatic Cold-War language," which it charged gave the address an "oddly outdated sound."** Few media could resist making negative comparisons with John Kennedy's speech to throngs of several hundred thousand in 1963, but the Frankfurter Rundschau's editorialist went further and claimed the address "lacked the spiritual dimensions" that "Richard Nixon ... (and) Jimmy Carter" achieved in similar efforts.

*The Frankfurter Rundschau, although the same notes were struck in The Guardian, the Financial Times, and the independent Sueddeutsche Zeitung (Munich).

**This was the moderate Independent, which also quipped that the President failed to draw as large a crowd on the other side of the wall as had two British rock groups earlier in the week. More important, both East German and Soviet media (Moscow Television Service and East Berlin ADN International Service) blasted the speech as rhetoric "right from the Cold-war era" and as a "provocative . . . violation of the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin."

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Conclusion

Based on evidence from press commentaries and statements by public officials, we believe that President Reagan's West German visit made a generally favorable impression on West Europeans and may even have marginally improved recently strained relations with Bonn. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] and about the prospects for the ideas advanced in his speech. [REDACTED]

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